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The QUARREL between POETRY and PHILOSOPHY

Edited by Alessandra Aloisi and Danilo Manca

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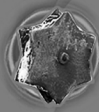
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Introduction

Alessandra Aloisi and Danilo Manca

1.

When in Book Ten of the Republic Plato proscribes poetry from the city and refers to a long-standing quarrel between poetry and philosophy, he raises an issue that has since made its mark on the history of Western thought. The aim of this volume is to delve deeper into the original meaning of this quarrel, to evaluate the implications it has had for the Western way of thinking and writing, and to explore the different forms the quarrel has assumed, between poetry and philosophy, between literature and philosophy.

In *Phaedo*, Socrates admits to often having dreamt of cultivating the art of the Muses. For years he had taken it to be an exhortation to practice philosophy, which he meant as the highest form of ‘music’. But, on his deathbed, he understands that he was required ‘to compose myths, not simply to elaborate arguments’ (*Phaedo*, 61b). Starting from this passage of Plato’s *Phaedo*, the volume opens with David Roochnik’s essay *Poetry as Philosophical*

Self-Criticism, which shows that, for Plato, genuine philosophical self-examination requires poetry. Moreover, Roochnik compares Plato's statement with Aristotle's attitude; unlike Socrates in *Phaedo* and Plato, who regularly includes characters who are not philosophers (such as Aristophanes, Callicles, Philebus, Protagoras) in his dialogues, Aristotle is more focused on the business of explaining the ways things are. Roochnik argues that Aristotle should examine his position: as Socrates says in the *Apology*, "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being". Thus, a philosopher is required to examine his conviction that philosophy is the best of all possible human lives and that discourse (*logos*) is the only way to express the truth.

Franco D'Intino's contribution on Leopardi and Plato (*Drama and Poetry vs Philosophy*) frames the composition of the *Operette morali* within Giacomo Leopardi's paradoxical "anti-Platonic Platonism". On the one hand, Leopardi considered Plato to be one of the most profound and sublime philosophers because of his capacity to be poetic in his style and inventions. On the other, Leopardi's ideas about poetry and theatre can be regarded as an exact reversal of the Platonic position, as they are founded on the same arguments that Plato used to condemn them. The *Operette Morali* – a unique combination of poetry and philosophy, of orality and writerliness – can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to negotiate

between two different and opposite images of Plato. Furthermore, by insisting on the corporeal, irrational and democratic dimension of theatre and poetry, which is criticized by Plato and appreciated by Leopardi, D'Intino's contribution highlights the ethical and political dimensions that are entailed in the quarrel between poetry and philosophy; this is demonstrated through a comparison with the positions of Goethe and Tocqueville on drama and theatre.

In the third essay of the volume, Andrew Benjamin takes as his starting point Plato's treatment of creativity in *Ion* and Ficino's corresponding commentary. His aim is to show how these texts shaped the paradigm and setting of hermeneutics. While creativity did not demand the following of rules, judgement was the *techné* emerging in relation to what had been created in this way. Rhapsode, who mediates between poet and audience, must be seen as the archetype of the reader, because he offers a performance that inspires and calls for judgement at the same time.

2.

By examining Camus's personal struggles with the written world, the fourth essay by Grace Whistler attempts to reconcile the ancient quarrel between philosophy and literature. In particular,

Whistler focuses on the rhetorical devices and techniques Camus employs in some of his literary works. She demonstrates that, for Camus, fiction provokes philosophical reflection and reconstructs a political dimension by exhibiting the deceptive function of linguistic communication. The difficulty that one encounters in the expression of one's feeling paradoxically brings the Self very close to Others by means of suffering and conundrums.

Lorenzo Serini's article, entitled *Where Philosophy Meets Poetry in Nietzsche's Writings from 1872-1873*, could be taken as an inspection of Camus's cultural and theoretical background. Serini does not deal with Camus, but with Nietzsche's theory of language, which is key to understanding how Plato's quarrel was understood and recast in the twentieth century. Serini interprets the quarrel between poetry and philosophy within the wider framework of Nietzsche's reflection on the conflict between art and science. Serini reconstructs Nietzsche's thought as follows: in his early writings, Nietzsche advocates art and criticises science; in his middle-period writings, he reevaluates science against art; and, in his later writings, he seems to retrieve both art and science, by focusing on their conflicting but necessary relationship.

3.

If poetry and philosophy are activities that stand on the same footing, one may argue that Plato's thesis against art and poetry, far from dealing with the problem of truth and its representation, has a purely political meaning. By banishing poetry from the polis that is ruled according to philosophical principles, Plato was trying to prevent a free circulation of words and discourses that might divert bodies from their social and intellectual destination. As Jacques Rancière would put it, Plato himself told stories and invented myths in order to justify a hierarchical order and to provide a foundation for a distribution of knowledge and rank that had no intrinsic foundation. From this point of view, the "ancient quarrel" between poetry and philosophy, between falsehood and truth, appears to be nothing but an expression of the never-ending quarrel between equality and inequality, between democracy and hierarchical order. Like philosophy, poetry is a way of using language and of "making" the truth; in other words, a way of thinking and of organizing reality that can rival the philosophical worldview

In the next pair of articles, Marco Menon and Edoardo Raimondi focus on the political aspects of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy, dealing with two of the first twentieth-century authors to raise the problem of the political role

the philosopher could play in society: Leo Strauss and Eric Weil, respective readers of Plato's and Aristotle's political philosophies.

In *An Unpolitical political philosophy? Some Remarks on Leo Strauss' 'Notes on Lucretius'*, Menon aims to demonstrate that Epicurean poetry could be seen as a political action on behalf of philosophy. Poetry functions as mediating between the citizen and the philosopher; its role is to sweeten the repulsive truth of the nature of things. Lucretius's teaching conditions young readers to live in a philosophical way and promises freedom from the terror of religion. For Strauss, Lucretius's teachings thus anticipate Enlightenment political strategy. However, the main point of difference from the Modern attitude regards the non-political character of such teaching. Lucretius offers an account of the coming into being of political society, but he does not deal with the question of the best regime. Such an account of Lucretius's teaching allows Strauss to foster his particular idea of political philosophy as an alternative to political sciences. In Strauss's view, political philosophy consists in sublimating human fears and desires by leading man to consider the problem of its happiness. The poet mediates between citizen and philosopher insofar as he insinuates in the soul attached to the world the philosophical impulse to be detached from the world, to seek truth and happiness by going beyond the ordinary way of living.

In *Poesia e Filosofia nella 'Logique de la Philosophie'*, Edoardo Raimondi tackles the problem of the relationship between *poiésis* and *praxis* in the main work of Eric Weil, who attempted to individuate the categories of the contemporary epoch after Hegel. For Weil, one devotion to poetry comes about from the need for a reasonable reality that gives sense to rationalistic techniques and discourses. Poetry is the creative act of giving sense and therefore a way of understanding what consciousness means. Raimondi emphasizes that, for Weil, poetry is not the opposite of philosophy; in fact it is nothing other than philosophy considered in its original form. Without poetry, no freedom could be achievable, nor could the main goal of philosophy – the search for sense and wisdom – be attainable.

4.

Another crucial aspect of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy is related to their objects and ways of knowing. To what extent can the poet's form of knowledge be distinguished from that of the philosopher? Is there any difference between the objects known by philosophy and the objects described by art and poetry? By referring back to Aristotle's statement that poetry is more philosophical than history because it deals with

universals, Paolo Godani's contribution (*L'individuo tra estetica e romanzo*) seeks to challenge the commonplace of modern Aesthetics and Literary Theory that poetry (and art in general) deals with concrete historical individuals whilst philosophy takes as its object universals'. Considering the case of the novel (notably Stendhal, Balzac and Musil), Godani maintains that this genre has to do with "characters", understood as ensembles of common qualities that represent types rather than individuals. From this standpoint, according to Godani, the novel also represents an explicit counter to the individualistic trend typical of modernity, where the psychological notion of character starts to be used to define personal identity.

In the final essay of the volume, Walter Benjamin *tra redenzione e rammemorazione* via Proust, Marco Piazza offers an emblematic example of the essential connection between poetry and philosophy for what concerns their methodologies and ways of knowing. Piazza shows the role that Proust's theory of knowledge, elaborated in the literary domain, plays in Benjamin's philosophical conception of history. The form of experience based on the so-called *mémoire involontaire*, where the past unexpectedly resurfaces and resonates with our present, provides Benjamin with the methodological model for a philosophical understanding of time and history that offers an alternative to the conception proposed by historicism.